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THE CELTIC INFLUENCE ON APPALACHIAN MUSIC

BY TED OLSON



Visitors fortunate enough to hear the John Doyle Trio during the Mountains of Music Homecoming will be reminded of the old but not forgotten bonds between Appalachia and the British Isles. A native of Dublin, Ireland, Doyle formerly played guitar with the Irish super-group Solas and is today a leading luminary in the traditional Celtic music revival. The John Doyle Trio—featuring Doyle on guitar and vocals, Duncan Wickel on fiddle, and David Curley on vocals, bodhran, mando, and banjo—will play a range of Celtic ballads, songs, and tunes, and Curley will likely take a turn or two as a step dancer. Add to that the American based Irish music masters trio of Rose Conway Flanagan, Laura Byrne, and Pat Egan as well as Bristol based Sigeian (pronounced She-gun), and the extent of the connection between Ireland and Appalachia is revealed.

A major reason for the inclusion of these artists in the Mountains of Music Homecoming is to acknowledge the significant impact of Celtic traditions on Appalachian music. Because more than half of the settlers that emigrated to Appalachia came from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, the Celtic influence constitutes the single-most dynamic ethnic influence upon Appalachian music. The fiddle, for instance, was brought to Appalachia by settlers from Scotland and Northern Ireland, who also brought with them fiddle tunes and ballads that continued to be played across Appalachia. The Irish influence in Appalachia became more prominent after the 1840s when the potato blight in Ireland forced many people into immigrating to the New World. Appalachian musicians began reinterpreting traditional Irish hornpipes, reels, and jigs.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Celtic American music merged with African American music. Appalachian musicians of Celtic ancestry—such as the Virginian Joel Walker Sweeney—were among the earliest white rural folk to learn banjo from African Americans, resulting in a widespread blending of fiddle and banjo heard in commercial minstrel shows as well as in folk ensembles. A strong Scottish or Scots-Irish influence, which lingered in twentieth-century Appalachian music, remains evident today in the performing styles of a wide range of singers and instrumentalists from The Crooked Road area.

Ted Olson is the author of Blue Ridge Folklife, a study of Blue Ridge culture, and a Grammy Award-nominated music historian.